

Attorney Docket No. 9389-2  
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**In the Claims:**

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (Currently Amended) A method for supplying a clip to a clip window associated with a closure attachment mechanism adapted to allow a single clip or two clips to be controllably applied to a target tubular work piece in a closure zone in an automated manner, comprising:

automatically forcing a plurality of clips to travel in a first predetermined clip travel path having a forward direction toward a first punch path in a closure zone at a first point in time;

automatically, selectively, and forcibly retracting the plurality of clips so that the clips travel in a reverse direction along the first predetermined clip travel path away from the first punch path; and then

automatically forcing the plurality of clips to again travel in the forward direction along the first predetermined clip travel path at a second point in time.

2. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, further comprising:

automatically holding the plurality of clips above a first clip window associated with the first punch path in the closure zone for a desired interval after said retracting step and before said second forcing step, the interval associated with the number of target tubular workpieces that pass through the closure zone without receiving a clip from the first punch path; and

automatically intermittently attaching a clip to selected tubular workpieces that pass through the closure zone using clips advanced along the first clip path to the first punch path during the ~~first and second~~ forcing steps.

3. (Original) A method according to Claim 2, further comprising:

repeatedly forcing a second plurality of clips to travel in a second predetermined clip travel path having a forward direction toward a second punch path with a second clip window;

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automatically concurrently attaching one clip from the first clip punch path and one clip from the second clip punch path thereby selectively applying one clip to a greater number of target tubular workpieces and two clips to fewer numbers of target tubular workpieces as the tubular workpieces move through the closure zone.

4. (Original) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the tubular workpieces are stuffed food product held in a casing material, said method further comprising advancing the tubular stuffed food product in a predetermined forward travel path and stalling the forward movement during the forcing steps.

5. (Original) A method according to Claim 4, wherein the stuffed food products are meat products.

6. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, further comprising reciprocating a first punch to travel along the first punch path during the ~~first and second~~ forcing steps and the retracting step to selectively direct a clip positioned in the clip window to wrap about an end portion of one tubular product in the first clip window during the ~~first and second~~ forcing steps.

7. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the ~~first~~ forcing steps comprise[[s]] pushing the clips to travel in a generally downward direction, and wherein the retracting step comprises pulling the clips to travel in a generally upward direction.

8. (Original) A method according to Claim 1, further comprising feeding a spool of attached clips to travel along a generally downwardly extending static rail with a lateral portion that defines the first predetermined travel path so that the forwardmost portion of the spool of clips enters a clip window to engage with a punch attachment mechanism in the first punch path.

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9. (Original) A method according to Claim 8, further comprising punching a clip in the clip window to force the clip to wrap around an underlying target workpiece.

10. (Original) A method according to Claim 9, wherein the clips are metallic with a discontinuous perimeter having generally open end portions that when attached to the tubular work product sealably enclose spaced apart end portions of the tubular work product.

11. (Currently Amended) ~~A method according to Claim 1,~~

A method for supplying a clip to a clip window associated with a closure attachment mechanism adapted to allow a single clip or two clips to be controllably applied to a target tubular work piece in a closure zone in an automated manner, comprising:

automatically forcing a plurality of clips to travel in a first predetermined clip travel path having a forward direction toward a first punch path in a closure zone at a first point in time;

automatically selectively retracting the plurality of clips so that the clips travel in a reverse direction along the first predetermined clip travel path away from the first punch path; and then

automatically forcing the plurality of clips to again travel in the forward direction along the first predetermined clip travel path at a second point in time.

wherein the forcing step at the second point in time is a second forcing step that comprises contacting an outer perimeter portion of at least one clip with a retraction member having a jaw with first and second opposing spaced apart hinged jaw members in communication with an extension spring configured to allow the hinged jaw members to open and close a desired distance to pull the clips in a generally upward direction away from a clip feed direction.

12. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 11, wherein the forcing step at the first point in time is a first forcing step that comprises contacting the outer perimeter of at

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least one of the plurality of clips with a pivotable pusher pawl and applying force in a generally forward direction to push the plurality of clips in the clip feed direction.

13. (Original) A method according to Claim 12, wherein said retracting step comprises:

disengaging the pusher pawl from the clips; and  
engaging the jaw members of the retraction member with a plurality of adjacent clips.

14. (Original) A method according to Claim 13, wherein the clip has a central crown region that terminates into two opposing leg portions, and wherein the jaw members have a contact edge portion with a profile that corresponds to the outer profile of the legs of abutting clips.

15. (Original) A method according to Claim 13, wherein said first and second forcing steps comprise:

disengaging the jaw members of the retraction member from the clips; and  
engaging the pusher pawl with the clips.

16. (Original) A method according to Claim 12, wherein the pusher pawl is disposed above the retraction member.

17. (Original) A method according to Claim 16, further comprising separating the retraction jaws a suitable distance to release the clips after the retracting step and before the second forcing step.

18. (Original) A method according to Claim 17, wherein the opposing jaw members have legs with opposing top and bottom end portions, the top end portions being pivotably connected to the retraction mechanism and the bottom end portions defining the clip contact portion with the extension spring laterally extending therebetween.

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19. (Original) A method according to Claim 18, wherein the retraction member further comprises at least one jaw stop disposed above the retraction jaw members, the retraction jaw members each having an inner surface that faces the other, wherein, in operation, the jaw stop defines a cam surface and the jaw retraction member inner surfaces cooperate with the jaw stop cam surface to force the spaced apart legs to open and stretch the spring extending therebetween.

20. (Original) A method according to Claim 15, wherein the pusher pawl is disposed above the retraction member, said method further comprising rotating the pusher pawl upon contact with a stop anvil disposed above the pusher pawl to space the head away from the clips to thereby disengage the pusher pawl from the clips.

21. (Original) A method for controllably supplying a clip to a clip window associated with a closure attachment mechanism having a closure delivery path for allowing attachment of a single clip or two clips concurrently to a target tubular work piece in a closure zone, comprising:

automatically pushing a plurality of clips to travel in a first predetermined clip travel path having a forward direction toward a first closure delivery path in a closure zone at a first point in time;

automatically selectively pulling the plurality of clips so that the clips travel in a reverse direction along the first predetermined clip travel path; and then

automatically pushing the plurality of clips to again travel in the forward direction along the first predetermined clip travel path at a second point in time.

22-36 (Canceled)

37. (New) A method according to Claim 21, further comprising automatically holding the plurality of clips above a first clip window associated with a punch path merging into the

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closure zone for a desired interval after said pulling step and before said pushing step at the second point in time, the interval associated with a desired number of target tubular workpieces that pass through the closure zone without receiving a clip from the punch path; and

automatically intermittently attaching a clip to selected tubular workpieces that pass through the closure zone using clips advanced along the clip path to the punch path during the pushing steps.

38 . (New) A method according to Claim 37, further comprising:

repeatedly forcing a second plurality of clips to travel in a second predetermined clip travel path having a forward direction toward a second punch path with a second clip window that is axially spaced apart from the first clip window;

automatically concurrently attaching one clip from the clip punch path and one clip from the second clip punch path thereby selectively applying one clip to a greater number of target tubular workpieces and two clips to fewer numbers of target tubular workpieces as the tubular workpieces move through the closure zone.

39. (New) A method according to Claim 37, wherein the tubular workpieces are stuffed food product held in a casing material, said method further comprising advancing the tubular stuffed food product in a predetermined forward axial travel path and stalling the forward movement during the pushing steps.

40. (New) A method according to Claim 39, wherein the stuffed food products are meat products.

41. (New) A method according to Claim 21, wherein the pushing step at the second point in time is a second pushing step that comprises contacting an outer perimeter portion of at least one clip with a retraction member having a jaw with first and second opposing spaced apart hinged jaw members in communication with an extension spring configured to allow

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the hinged jaw members to open and close a desired distance to pull the clips in a generally upward direction away from a clip feed direction.

42. (New) A method according to Claim 41, wherein the pushing step at the first point in time is a first forcing step that comprises contacting the outer perimeter of at least one of the plurality of clips with a pivotable pusher pawl and applying force in a generally downward direction to push the plurality of clips in the clip feed direction.

43. (New) A method according to Claim 42, wherein said retracting step comprises: disengaging the pusher pawl from the clips; and engaging the jaw members of the retraction member with a plurality of adjacent clips.

44. (New) A method according to Claim 43, wherein the clip has a central crown region that terminates into two opposing leg portions, and wherein the jaw members have a contact edge portion with a profile that corresponds to the outer profile of the legs of abutting clips.

45. (New) A method according to Claim 43, wherein said pushing steps comprise: disengaging the jaw members of the retraction member from the clips; and engaging the pusher pawl with the clips.